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SUBJECT: UNITED RUSSIA WINS PETROZAVODSK MAYORAL ELECTION TWO WEEKS
BEFORE THE VOTE

REF: ST. PETERSBURG 008

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Karelia's Governor Katanandov appointed former opposition politician and mayoral candidate Davletkhan Alikhanov to the position of governor's representative in Russia's Federation Council. In exchange, Alikhanov withdrew from Petrozavodsk's mayoral election, which many thought he had a good shot of winning. Alikhanov, a former member of A Just Russia's faction in the Republic of Karelia's Legislative Assembly, joined United Russia and promised to patch up all differences and cooperate with Katanandov. Alikhanov's withdrawal assures victory in the upcoming election for United Russia's nominee, Karelia's Legislative Assembly Speaker Levin, who faces no other serious challengers. Prior to these political maneuvers, the Petrozavodsk mayoral election had the signs of actually being competitive and offering voters a choice. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Petrozavodsk's mayor's office became vacant in January when former Mayor Vladimir Maslyakov unexpectedly resigned (reftel) over the regional government's decision to move up the mayoral election from 2010 to 2009 despite Maslyakov's objections. A special mayoral election to fill the post is scheduled for July 5. United Russia (with Governor Sergey Katanandov's approval) nominated Karelia's Legislative Assembly Speaker Nikolay Levin as its candidate. The majority in Petrozavodsk's City Council, who are generally opposed to Governor Katanandov and United Russia, backed former Vice Speaker of the Legislative Assembly Davletkhan Alikhanov, a local construction entrepreneur who has been politically active for years. The City's Election Commission registered both Levin and Alikhanov, along with six other lesser-known candidates, while rejecting two other candidates for submitting invalid registration forms.

¶3. (SBU) Opposition forces in Petrozavodsk were weakened by the recent criminal conviction of one of its leaders, former Petrozavodsk City Council Chairman Vasiliy Popov. Popov was found guilty in February of blackmailing a politician close to Katanandov - a three-year old charge that had been revived at an opportune time for the Karelian Government and United Russia. (Note: While we can't be certain of the merits of the conviction, its timing was certainly convenient) Popov would have been a strong contender in the mayoral election himself, but, because of his conviction, he is now barred by Russian law from running for elected office.

¶4. (SBU) Alikhanov, who had been a member of the A Just Russia faction in the Republic's Legislative Assembly and had numerous allies among the party's regional activists, sought the support of his party for his candidacy. But the party's federal and regional leadership decided against supporting him for what appear to be internal party reasons. Moreover, the Karelian branch of A Just Russia recently changed its leadership, excluding Alikhanov's allies from major posts. The local Communist Party also refused to back Alikhanov, despite failing to nominate their own candidate for the job of mayor. Alikhanov therefore ran as an independent candidate without official support from any party.

¶5. (SBU) Alikhanov seemed poised to win the upcoming mayoral

elections. Recent polls showed that Alikhanov was leading with 24% of the expected vote, while Levin was second with 21%. All other candidates had less than 10% combined, while some 45% of Petrozavodsk's residents remained undecided. Alikhanov maintained his slight lead despite the apparent heavy governmental pressure on local media. Major television channels in Karelia reportedly broadcast only positive coverage of Levin, turning their local news reports into essentially free advertising for Levin. At the same time, local TV stations announced they would not broadcast any campaign commercials. This left Alikhanov with little opportunity to get his message across and let Levin effectively dominate the airwaves.

¶6. (SBU) On June 15, Governor Katanandov unexpectedly proposed that Alikhanov become Karelia's new representative in Russia's Federation Council. Karelia's Legislative Assembly quickly approved this proposal, and Alikhanov announced his withdrawal from the mayoral race. He then entered into discussions with federal policy makers in Moscow and subsequently joined United Russia together with his ally Oleg Fokin, who had succeeded Popov as Petrozavodsk's City Council Chairman. Commenting on their decision, Alikhanov and Fokin said that they viewed political consolidation as an important step during the ongoing economic crisis.

¶7. (SBU) Comment. Over the course of the year, political competition in Karelia has been significantly weakened. Mayor Maslyakov, who was at odds with the regional government, resigned in January. Next, opposition leader Popov was barred from running for office after his blackmail conviction. Now, two other prominent independent political leaders have moved away from the opposition camp and joined United Russia. As a result, United Russia's candidate will almost certainly win Petrozavodsk's upcoming July 5 mayoral race. Additionally, Alikhanov's allies in Petrozavodsk's City Council will likely follow their comrade and join United Russia's faction, thus transforming it into the City Council's major party. End Comment.

GWALTNEY